



COMMON GROUND



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMON

Issue 10. August 1995

Grand Plan Revealed for Happy Valley

Beacon Hotel owner, John Cullen, hopes to formally link the 101 steps with his 16 acres of Victorian landscaped grounds, as Patrick Shovelton reveals in his Chairman's Letter.

The most exciting news to have surfaced since the last issue of Common Ground is the announcement from our member, John Cullen, owner of the Beacon Hotel, to renovate the area of Happy Valley as a public amenity.

The overall idea is to re-create the 16 acres of Victorian gardens of the Beacon in Happy Valley, the old Bath House and the three lakes, whilst maintaining wildlife habitats and the existing flora and fauna. Public access would be made available from the bottom of the 101 steps so linking Happy Valley again to Rusthall Common.

The Conservators are already considering the repair and renovation of the 101 steps - possibly as a memorial to the late Lady of the Manor, Griselda Kentner. An appeal could go out for these imaginative projects and your Committee have already said, on behalf of the Friends, that we would be glad to contribute what we could.

Meanwhile John Cullen is approaching all relevant authorities - the Countryside Commission, English Nature, Kent County Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council as well as the Conservators - to see if he can get support for his ambitious plan. He kindly says that if any of our members would like to take the fascinating walk around the lakes from the 101 steps or from the Beacon Hotel, he will be glad to give permission if they ring him or his staff on TW 524252.

Otherwise over these last four months since the last Common Ground was published our proposals against coach and car parking on Commons

roads (see last issue of Common Ground) have been considered by TWBC Highways in the context of the overall Transportation Strategy for the Town. The Conservators have supported our proposals and TWBC Highways are shortly going to conduct a survey of coach parking in the Town, a necessary first step on what will be a frustratingly long process.

An appeal could go out for these imaginative projects

Otherwise, I leave Steve Budden elsewhere on this page and overleaf to report on developments on the Commons over the last four months. We can only reiterate our

deep congratulations to him for the great improvements he continues to make.

Editors Note: Compare on page three this constructive approach to that of the new owner of the Mt Edgcombe Hotel.

DIARY DATES

We are now preparing next winter's work parties. Work will start in September, earlier than usual and stopping a month early, in March.

- SEPT 3rd - Pond Clearance (Fir Tree and Bracken)
- OCT 1st - Pond Clearance (Marlpits)
- NOV 5th - Rock Clearance (Mount Edgcombe)
- DEC 3rd - Grassland Maintenance
- JAN 7th - Tree Planting
- FEB 4th - Tree Planting
- MAR 10th - Scrub Clearance (Toad Rock)

All work parties start at 10am on Sundays and we meet in Fir Tree Road car park.

Litter Pick - there will be a litter pick on Saturday September 30th. Meet 10am Fir Tree Road car park or opposite the Brahm's public house, Rusthall. Bring gloves. Bags will be provided.

WARDEN'S REPORT

During the Spring I was delighted to have a visit from a research team from the University of Kent who carried out a survey of amphibian populations in some of the ponds on the Commons. Newt traps were set overnight in Fir Tree Pond on Tunbridge Wells Common and in the two marlpit ponds on Rusthall Common. The results the following morning were very encouraging. Fir Tree Pond produced good numbers of smooth and palmate newts, as well as a very high number of tadpoles (much to the delight of the newts,

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who could be seen steadily chewing their way through the mass of spawn).

The smaller pond at Rusthall held much frog spawn and an unusually high population of smooth newts. The larger pond produced a healthy population of Great Crested Newts. AH the ponds on the Commons are at present quite choked with weed growth, partly due to the very dry summer we have had. Because of the high level of insect and animal activity in and around the ponds, these will be left until the Autumn before clearance takes place. This year's first two volunteer work parties will be used to accomplish this.

LANDROVER PURCHASED

The Conservators have now purchased a Landrover to help carry out maintenance tasks. This should be invaluable during the winter for transporting tools and equipment to work sites for work parties as well as providing a more visible presence on the ground during the rest of the year.

As many of you will have noticed, a very large limb was ripped out of one of the Corsican pines on Hungershall Park near its junction with Major York's Road by high winds. The huge hole left in the trunk of the tree is rather worrying. The tree in question forms part of the 'Lutwidge Group' planted in 1895. Because of its historic and visual significance, we decided to try and retain the tree in spite of the serious wounding. To that end, the tree has been reduced in height to minimise leverage on the lower stem. It will be monitored over the next few years to see if this fine old tree can be saved.

At least two of the line of ten lime trees on the other side of the road from Brighton Lake are infected with Ganaderma, a fungus that can cause severe decay in the lower trunk and roots. These trees require pollarding to reduce leverage,

SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL

Subscriptions are due from September 1st. Would members not on direct debit please despatch their very modest fee (£5 per individual, £10 per family) to David Wakefield, 68 London Road, Tunbridge Wells. Cheques to be made out to the Friends of the Commons, please.

Please also take this opportunity to encourage friends, family and neighbours to join. The bigger our membership, the greater our influence.

Griselda KENTNER

so we are going to have the whole line pollarded. These trees have clearly been pollarded in the past and so will be cut back to the original points. This work will be carried out in the Autumn.

July was cutting and raking the areas of grass left for the spring flowers. Although we are only in the second year of this treatment, there are encouraging signs. The process of reducing the fertility of the soil in these areas seems to have proceeded more rapidly than we could have hoped; the 'hay crop' is noticeably lighter this year. The small area opposite the entrance to Bretland Road on Rusthall Common showed the advantages of leaving the flowers to seed before cutting the grass. A much heavier crop of Ladies Smock ensued.

The problem of litter is as bad as ever. The seats and bin near the ever-problematic Forum have now been removed and resited, the benches have been replaced by new Hawthorne seats and they and the litter bin have been moved back into the beginning of the tree cover. I do not imagine that this will do anything for the litter problem except move it further from the road, but it has made a great difference visually to the area. This, combined with the clearance of the storm-damaged trees from Strange's Avenue, has improved this part of the town.

Before leaving the subject of litter, I am aware that several members do carry a bag with them whilst on the Commons and very kindly pick up what litter they see. If other members would be so kind as to do this, it would make a tremendous difference. **SB**

The Exploring Twenties

Majorie Wheatley (now in her nineties) reflects on the Commons as she knew them in the 1920's.

It was in the twenties that I first knew the delight of Tunbridge Wells Common, on days out from London. Half a crown was the price of a day return.

We arrived at about 12.30, just the right time to explore the Common, and find a good place to picnic. Then, after further exploration, and the rocks, we walked along to Rusthall Common, and found a pleasant sheltered rest, part way down the 100 steps, sometimes called the Roman Steps. We rested there, enjoying the view of Happy Valley. Later we made our way back for tea.

In the thirties we came to live in Tunbridge Wells, the Common being our greatest joy, especially the westerly part with much bird song in the spring. One eagerly awaited the arrival of the chiff-chaff, and everywhere in April the willow warblers would sing up in the birches. Nightingales were everywhere, and one could sit on a seat with one singing just behind in a bush. Occasionally we heard a cuckoo.

Then came tragedy - the unemployed were put to clearing the undergrowth - so few birds came to nest there, and we said goodbye to the nightingales. I did hear one, however, near Romanoff.

Clearance is only desirable near to paths, for safety's sake and a few grassy areas for children to play. The gales were really beneficial, as they produced more safe areas for nesting.

In memory of the late Lady of the Manor of Rusthall, Griselda Kentner, we publish an edited extract of the funeral address delivered by Jeremy Menuhin, her nephew, who has inherited the Lordship of the Manor.

Among her gifts, Griselda Kentner had a radiant beauty, a lifelong devotion to literature, and a light and sparkling theatrical talent which she never chose to develop. The circumstances of the war brought her into contact, through her work with MIS, with a much broader range of people than she would otherwise have known. This not only provided her with a picturesque vocabulary, which she drew on for the rest of her days, but also helped her achieve instant communication with people from all walks of life.

She had an instinctive sympathy for people in any kind of difficulty. For many years she visited T S Eliot's close friend, John Hayward, who was

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wheelchair-bound and not of the most positive disposition, and she made regular visits to the ladies in Holloway prison. Whenever she talked about these visits she would never adopt a tone of condescension towards the inmates, nor would she condemn their activities. The anecdotes that resulted from these visits were never recounted at the expense of the women. She could not reconcile herself to the cruelty of certain individuals' destinies, and often questioned the efforts of orthodox religion to provide explanations. Her view of all religion was somewhat slanted by her rejection of Christian Science, in which she was brought up.

Among the many qualities that never deserted her was her wit, a source of delight to her friends. Often she used it as a means to hide her concern. To give an example, she referred to the experience of attending her husband Louis's concerts as similar to, or somewhat worse than anticipating

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root-canal surgery. If I happened to be sitting beside her during a concert, she would lean over and groan, "Oh God, Now comes the Hammerklavier. Did he really have to write it? Any why did Loo put it in the programme?"

Griselda would do anything to make Louis's life easier, so that he could devote his energies to his work. She crossed half of London in search of the correct Tafelspitz, a sort of cut of beef, or Backhendl, chicken with fried parsley, or whatever recipe she was preparing from the Austro-Hungarian repertoire to which Loo had grown so attached in his youth. It might be considered old-fashioned to support your husband in this way, when, as a very intelligent and independent-minded woman you could have struck out on your own, but I believe that Griselda wished to serve both her husband and his gifts.

I think it a pity that Griselda did not trust in herself more. She used to say that if she recognised someone whilst out and about, even someone for whom she might feel a certain sympathy, she would dive behind the nearest car or similar obstruction in order to avoid being seen. Although she was very funny about it, this attitude was indicative of her diffidence. She pretended to be a misanthrope, but in fact she loved her friends far too deeply.

Among these friends is one in particular who made it possible for Griselda's last years, and especially last months, to be experienced more tolerably. I am referring to Nicholas Van den Branden, a neighbour in Tunbridge Wells, who developed a wonderful friendship with her, and who recognised those qualities in her that went beyond sharp wit and the desire to entertain others. It was Nikki who visited Griselda's bedside every day during her convalescence last summer. It was also Nikki who spent the last hours with her. Her courage before death was a lesson to me and one that I shall not forget.

Griselda never got over Louis's death in 1987, having lost her closest companion in him. There was one other who vied for the position of her closest friend, her brother Gerard, with whom she shared her childhood, so confiding that her

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devoted sister, Diana, my mother, sometimes felt excluded. Gerard's descent into madness, unremitting until his death forty years later, caused Griselda, I believe, to lose a part of her faith in life. That she should have become a pessimist after this is perhaps no surprise. Familiar to some of us was her account of life in Schattsalp, the sanatorium in Switzerland to which she had been sent because of her TB. The stories emanating from that place were among the blackest.

Having formerly had many friends, Griselda's circle became narrower during her last years. We will all remember her ability to listen and sympathise - she called herself a "foul-weather friend" - but in fact she gave support at all times, including the very best of times, being genuinely happy when her friends' lives improved. After Louis died, she decided to re-establish her roots in Tunbridge Wells. She concentrated on dealing with the affairs of the Manor of Rusthall, an activity at which she excelled, continuing unabated until almost the very end.

A few years ago Griselda asked Zamira to pay a visit to the vicar of Speldhurst, Mr Fortnum's predecessor, and make arrangements for her to be buried there when the time came. I am very pleased that so many of us have been able to attend her funeral.

Griselda was an extremely giving person and we remember her with gratitude and love."

Editor's Note -

In the next issue we hope to interview Mr Menuhin. Baron Nicholas Van den Branden has now been appointed one of the Manor's representatives on the Conservators.

'TRIPLE WHAMMY FROM HOTEL'S NEW OWNER

At the time of going to press widespread concern has emerged over the attitude of the Mt Edgcombe Hotel's new owner to the Common, the Conservators and the rule of law. Patrick Shovelton counted to three before cautiously penning this piece.

MOUNT EDGCUMBE HOTEL

THE SIGNPOST

This has been a cause célèbre over the last month or so. The new owner of the Mt Edgcombe Hotel, Mr Butler, has put up this sign (see picture inset), without any permission from the Council, the Conservators or the Manor - all of whose permission in law he should have obtained. The Friends are not against a new sign by Mt Ephraim indicating the hotel and the adjoining houses. But there are now two signs, littering the landscape, as well as a new large concrete base let into the Common. At the time of going to press we understand that negotiations are proceeding between all the affected parties. We trust that a sensible and harmonious outcome will be achieved.

ROAD WIDENING

At the same time as l'affaire enseigne, the Manor, after discussions with the hotel and the local residents, has applied to the Council for permission to take part of the Common to widen the road as it passes the hotel and so provide better access to the houses behind. We understand the residents, some of whom are our members, have mixed views about the proposal. Naturally they like the idea of better access (if indeed that is achieved) but, like us, do not like the plan to take more of the Common. Your Committee

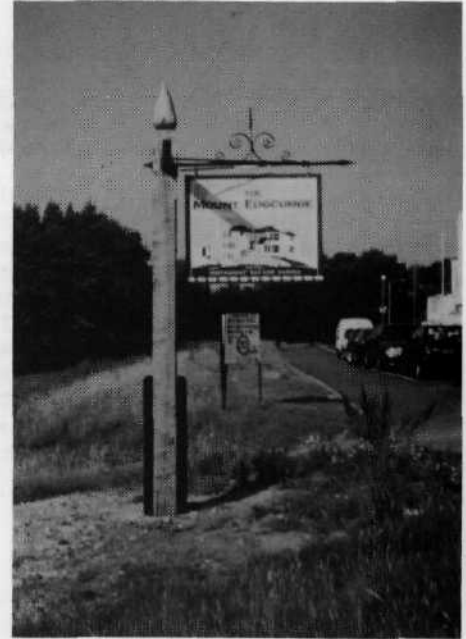
takes the view that the Commons are inviolate, that no development of any kind should be allowed, that this would be an unwelcome precedent and that permission should not be granted. We also believe that, if the road is widened, it will have little or none of the desired effect unless effective measures are taken to control parking outside the hotel. Already cars are parked indiscriminately on the Common and, as already stated, sometimes blocking the access to the houses. We

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have suggested that a barrier might be installed at the houses access point and the tarmac in front clearly marked with white or yellow lines to indicate no parking. We await developments.

DUMPING

The new owners have also painted another sign (illegally) on the back of the Grade II listed building and taken it into their hands to mow an extensive portion of the Common behind the hotel and have dumped (so it is believed) large amounts of litter and grass cuttings on the Common behind the hotel. We understand that the Council and the Conservators are in dispute with the hotel owner on all these matters. Your Committee, wholly support the Conservators and the Manor in their attitude to illegal trespass.



The Wrong Way to Make Friends

From Cllr James E Scholes

Parking on Commons Roads

I have quite some difficulty in agreeing with all of your proposals.

In particular I doubt the wisdom of double yellow lining Major York's Road.

(a) I was the Councillor who got double yellow lines on one side of the road. It has resulted in reduced speeds.

(b) My son was nearly killed by a vehicle speeding down Major York's and which smashed into the Art shop near to the hotel - his friend was taken to hospital. He was on foot.

I am convinced that parking here reduces speed in a way which is necessary.

(c) On Saturdays the Pantiles traders believe that this parking helped their trade. At the time of the previous restrictions being put in (albeit 10 to 15 years ago) I did promise not to yellow line both sides.

I have no difficulty with the other roads.

LETTERS

From John B C Bennett

It is encouraging to learn of all the good work being done to improve the Common. The



The path leading down to Bull's Hollow after the freak snowstorm April '95.

Photo by Doug Brooks

benefits of the improved Common are now there for all to see and enjoy.

I sympathise with "GB" and "A Canine Plea" but surely freedom for dogs to run about on the Common under their masters' supervision is not incompatible with responsible action by those masters to minimise the effect of their charges. I have seen some owners carefully scooping and others deliberately looking the other way to distract attention from the fouling of the Common.

Some fouling will occur out of sight of the most attentive master but considering the devoted attention given to dogs by loving owners a large proportion of the inadvertent fouling could be recovered if there were to be the will and sufficient public reprobation.

If young children were to be allowed to foul the Common even to a fractional extent of that by dogs there would be a public outcry. Many dogs are several times the size of children but as a nation of dog lovers we allow this nuisance to continue.

Let's hope that the problem is not insurmountable and if we cannot have strong byelaws let's educate.

PPP PRINT SECTION

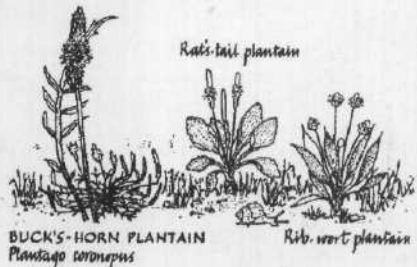
This is the last occasion on which Common Ground will be printed by PPP as they are closing their Print Section in Chapman Way. They have most expertly printed our Issue 2-10 for nothing, thus saving the Friends well over £1,000. If any member knows of any firm who will be similarly kind to us would they please let Patrick Shovelton know. Meanwhile we offer our grateful thanks and good wishes to John Farmer, Roy Bastin, Steve Russell and others in the PPP Print Section who have helped us so much over the last 3 years.

THE TOWN'S A BEACH

The architecture of Mt Ephraim reminds one of a seaside resort. Here Mary Page confirms the image saying many Common flowers will be found by the beach.

FLOWERS OF THE COMMON 5

As I write this article in July, many of us are taking away-days and holidays by the sea where we will find different flowers from those we usually see, but because of the sandy nature of the soil on the Common, we have a few plants there which are more often found at the coast. They are not very spectacular, but nevertheless interesting, I think.



Plantains are very common weeds everywhere. RAT'S TAIL PLANTAIN *Plantago major*, is known in America as Englishman's Foot having been introduced there by the early settlers and seemingly spread by them wherever they went. RIBWORT PLANTAIN, *Plantago lanceolata* has the country name of Fighting Cocks from an old custom of children matching the heads of this plantain against each other, rather in the way children now play "conkers". Both of these plants grow on the Common as does another less widespread one which loves a sandy soil, so is more usually found near the sea. It is the BUCKS-HORN PLANTAIN, *Plantago coronopus* which grows in a very attractive rosette of leaves, the shape of which resemble the antlers of a deer, hence its name. Known also as Star of the Earth, its size depends on the amount of moisture it receives, growing from one to nine inches across with a spike of inconspicuous yellowish-brown flowers. Culpeper has a long list of diseases to be treated with Plantain including gout and ringworm.

Even more inconspicuous than the plantain is the minute member of the Peaflower family, the BIRDSFOOT, *Ornithopus perpusillus*, not to be confused with Bird's Foot Trefoil, *Latus corniculatus*, a much more widespread plant. Birdsfoot on Tunbridge Wells Common is extremely small, especially where it grows on the outfield of the cricket pitch and only slightly larger on Rusthall Common. If you have a lens or magnifying glass take a good look at it when you find it, and you will see it is very beautiful with its tiny red-veined, very pale yellow flowers. The name Birdsfoot comes from the seed pods which in a cluster look like a bird's foot. Richard Deakin who wrote *The Flowering Plants of Tunbridge Wells* in 1871 mentioned that it grew on the Common.

The Dock is another plant which tends to be disliked or ignored, but we do have at least four species on the Common. Three of them are frequent, the BROAD DOCK, *Rumex obtusifolius*, the CURLED DOCK, *Rumex*

FREEHOLDERS FIRM THEIR GRIP

THE HISTORY OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS & RUSTHALL COMMONS - PART 3

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the management of the Commons was in the hands of the Freeholders, who were responsible for regulating the use of the Commons for grazing and other purposes, collecting rents for permitted encroachments, and general management such as maintaining ponds and drainage channels. The growing population of the town put increasing pressure on the Commons, and the Freeholders began to realise that some active policing was necessary in order to "check the many trespasses and depredations that are constantly committed".

As well as the old problems of unauthorised encroachment, they now had to contend with dumping of rubbish, firing of the gorse, extensive destruction of the soil by persons digging for clay and sand, and over-grazing. It was discovered that local residents were acquiring tiny pieces of land within the manor boundaries so that they could claim the right to pasture large numbers of animals on the Commons, greatly outnumbering those of the legitimate Freeholders. In 1824 the Freeholders formed a committee to act as executive between their annual meetings, and from 1827 they began to employ a Common Driver and Pound Keeper to oversee the Commons on a day to day basis.

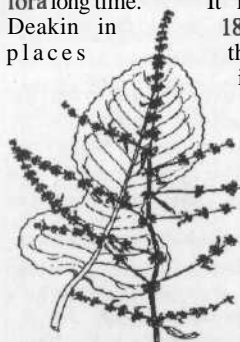
When John Colbran published his well known *New Guide for Tunbridge Wells* in 1839, the new regime had made the Commons much more well ordered, the Freeholders executing "very summary justice on those who attempt to invade their rights". It is Colbran who tells us how the Freeholders, on account of their enthusiastic tackling of abuses, had acquired the nickname of Hogpounders, a term which "although originally applied in derision, is now rather courted than rejected by them". It alluded to the impounding of offending animals, which were not returned to the owner until a fine had been paid. At their annual meeting the Freeholders used to perambulate the Manor inspecting any unauthorised buildings or fences, after which they held a dinner known as the 'Hogpounders' Feast'. Colbran, himself a Freeholder, is keen to remind his readers of their public spirited

attitude, describing them as "a body of men to whom the visitors and inhabitants of the Wells are greatly indebted, inasmuch as they are the means of protecting the beautiful Commons". In 1861 the Freeholders decided that their role as guardians of the Commons required some legal backing. With the support of the Manor they sought a new Act of Parliament to supplement the legislation of 1739. The result of their efforts was the Rusthall Manor Act of 1863, which established a formal register of Freeholders and empowered the Freeholders' Committee to make byelaws.

The policy of the Freeholders was not in fact entirely altruistic. As well as protecting their own grazing and other rights they also, many of them being tradesmen and lodging house keepers, had an interest in maintaining the Commons as an attraction for visitors. Deliberate attempts to beautify the Commons began in this period, the first being the planting of Royal Victoria Grove in 1835 to commemorate the visits of the young Princess Victoria (who had greatly enjoyed her rides on the Common on her donkey called 'Flower'), and to supersede the dying Queen Anne's Grove of 1702. In 1858 representatives of the Freeholders met with Rev. William Law Pope's Poor Fund Committee, set up to provide work for unemployed labourers. They agreed upon a programme of works which included the creation of a swampy hollow of what is now known as Brighton Lake, and the levelling of a 'greensward terrace walk' running parallel with Eridge Road on the slope above the new lake. In 1867 the Freeholders agreed to collaborate with the Tradesmen's Association in planting trees on various parts of Tunbridge Wells Common, whose open heathy landscape appeared to many to be somewhat barren. The newly formed Association for Promoting the Interests of the Town of Tunbridge Wells approached the Freeholders in 1874 with a scheme to create a turf walk or Promenade on the top of the Common along Mount Ephraim. This was finally put into effect in 1881, providing a pleasant stroll for fashionable visitors, from which they could obtain panoramic views of the town. IB

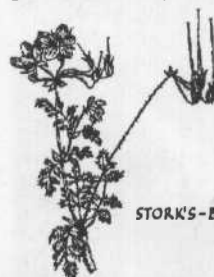
Editor's Note - like car clamping today.

crispa and the WOOD DOCK, *Rumex sanguineus*, but the fourth is less well known and rare away from the coast, FIDDLE DOCK, *Rumex pulcher*. It is not so large as the others, only about a foot high, and it is recognisable by its lower leaves which are waisted or fiddle-shaped and the flower stems which branch out at 45° rather than rising in a spike as most docks do. This plant has been on Tunbridge Wells Common for a long time. It is also mentioned by Deakin in 1871 as growing "on stony places there". I have never seen it on Rusthall Common.



FIDDLE DOCK
Rumex pulcher

STORKS-BILL, *Erodium cicutarium* is one of many plants found in sandy places by the sea. It too grows on the Commons, although at the coast the plant has bright pink petals, whereas our plants are very pale pink or white. Storks-



STORKS-BILL

bill is named after its seedcase which is thought to resemble the bill of a stork, and its Latin name *Erodium* comes from the Greek for heron. To complicate matters it is a member of the Geranium family whose name comes from the Greek for crane and to make confusion worse confounded, the garden Geraniums are properly known as Pelargoniums which comes from the Greek for stork. And all this because all members of this family have long podded seedcases which resemble the bills of long-beaked birds.

Mary Page