

RNRS HISTORY

On 7 December 1876 a group of eminent rosarians gathered together at the Horticultural Club in Adelphi Terrace in London. They were interested in the showing of roses and the organization of Rose Shows. The result was a new Society, the National Rose Society with Canon (later Dean) Reynolds Hole as President and the Rev. Henry Honeywood D'ombain as Secretary. Both were to remain in office for many years.

The new Society decided to hold a Grand Exhibition of Roses. Rose shows were not new. The first had been held in 1858 in St James's Hall in London and was a huge success. A poster advertising this show is among the RNRS's most treasured possessions. The Society's own first exhibition, again at St James's Hall, was less successful financially, as it was patronised mainly by members (who were admitted free) and their guests. But the committee persisted, and went on to hold popular exhibitions in London and, later, in Manchester.

These early shows were only for cut roses - rose blooms with short stems - staged in special display boxes. By the 1890s the Society's reports complain that this way of exhibiting roses was very monotonous and did not display the blooms to advantage. A protracted debate took place over the next few years between the merits of showing purely exhibition roses and those termed 'decorative' or 'garden' roses, arranged in a more artistic manner. By the First World War, the latter had made considerable inroads and were beginning to become accepted on the show-bench.

The Society had given Gold Medals to roses from as early as 1883. 'Mrs John Laing' was awarded one in 1885, 'Hugh Dickson' in 1903, 'Moonlight' in 1913 and 'Paul's Scarlet Climber' in 1915. These awards were all for roses as cut flowers.

After the First World War, the number of classes for exhibition roses decreased and more classes were introduced, to encourage owners of small gardens to exhibit and to attract more visitors to the shows. Some 35,000 came to the Metropolitan Summer Show in 1925. By this time the Society's membership had grown from 600 in 1900 to 13,000, and the Society began was turning its attention to the value of roses grown not for exhibition, but as garden plants.

In 1927 the Secretary, Courtney Page, organised a Trials Ground on land next to his garden at Haywards Heath. The 1920s had seen the further development of Hybrid Tea roses and the first of the cluster-flowered Floribundas. The first Trial Ground Certificates were awarded in 1930 and many good roses passed through the Society's trials during that decade.

Rose-growing and rose-breeding ceased almost completely during the Second World War, though the Society continued to publish its *Rose Annual*. After the war, new roses reawakened interest in growing roses and in the Society. This was the era of 'Peace' ('Mme Antoine Meilland' was the original name), 'Frensham' and 'Ena Harkness'. Awards to roses were still made at shows and exhibitions. It was not until the trial grounds moved to St Albans in 1961 that awards were made for solely for performance in the trials.

New Hybrid Teas and Floribundas flooded the market in the 1950s and 1960s. Roses became a fashionable plant within the reach of every garden owner. The membership of the society increased hugely, peaking at over 115,000 in the late 1960s. The Society bought a country house outside St Albans to act as its headquarters in 1960 and began to create display gardens around it. These gardens, fondly remembered by many, were opened by the Society's then Patron, the Princess Royal, in 1963. The society was favoured by Royal Patronage from an early stage: Queen Alexandra was Patron for 37 years and Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother for another 37 until her death in 2002. In 1965 H.M. the Queen commanded that the Society's name should be the Royal National Rose Society.

In 1976 the Society celebrated its centenary with a conference at Oxford and a show in London. The Society had developed beyond the wildest dreams of its original founders. It was the oldest and the largest specialist horticultural society. Roses were the most popular garden plant.

But already the fickle tide of fashion was turning. Other plant groups were gaining popularity at the expense of the rose. Gardeners began (quite wrongly) to say that roses were difficult to grow and prone to disease. Membership declined, but the Society continued to develop its gardens and its trials, extending these to include the way roses were pruned. When they revealed that hard pruning was not necessary and that cutting back with a hedge trimmer produced good results, the Society hit the headlines again.

The Society sought to redress the declining interest in rose-growing with ambitious plans to extend its gardens and include a memorial to the late Princess of Wales. These failed when the promised funds were not forthcoming. To remain solvent, and to continue to fulfil its charitable objectives, the Society decided to sell its house and half its land, which by now extended to 60 acres.

The core section of the garden remained, but the roses were old and the design was tired. The new garden has been made with mixed plantings in the modern style. Fortunately, roses are once again growing fast in popularity, as gardeners recognise the great variety of colours and shapes that they offer, as well as their scent and long flowering seasons. Nor are they difficult to grow: just feed them well. The new gardens also incorporate a collection of roses from all over the world - including some of the old ones exhibited by early members in their special display boxes.

The Society still seeks to display roses, and to delight and educate rose-lovers in this country and around the world. There are still shows for exhibitors and trials for new roses. And 2007 saw the centenary of the publication of the Society's *Rose Annual*.

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