

# ‘A Journey with Friends’

By Keith Robb

The scene for this epic journey goes back to 1967. That’s when it all started for me. Let me introduce you to Mr Jim Pitcaithly, Mr Kenny Robb (my father) and myself Keith Robb.

The first time I met big Jimmy as he is affectionately known (ex Scots Guards) was early spring 1967. I was fourteen and he arrived at my parent’s house with two hundred border carnation plants.

Dad and Jim were both shift managers with the ICI and he had persuaded dad to grow some plants. We had a large garden so decided to build a carnation house for our newly acquired plants. The greenhouse was constructed using timber and covered with clear PVC sheeting. Under strict instructions from Jim the plants were put straight into our existing cold frame until the greenhouse was finished and we had mixed our own John Innes N<sup>o</sup> 2 compost.

Potting from 3” pots to 6” clay pots is a job that I enjoy even today. I feel I must mention some of the varieties which we were given including: *Catherine Glover*, *Border Raider*, *Margaret Lennox*, *Edenside White*, *Egret*, *Bookham Spice*, *Belle of Bookham* and *Eva Humphries*. All of which I still grow and will always have in my collection.

Big Jimmy popped in every now and then to keep an eye on our progress, making sure we were watering and ringing when required. I asked him, “When did you start growing carnations?”, “In my early teens “, was his reply. He is now 84 years old and still growing but unable to travel any distance. For the last eight years my daughter and I, have been staging his blooms at the Scottish National for him. He is still producing flowers of excellent quality. The knowledge and advice he freely gives is invaluable, even today.

When Dad and I attended our first carnation show at Grangemouth, it was Jimmy who kept us right, showing us how to fill the vases and stage our blooms properly, most importantly selecting blooms for specific classes. Each class at this show could have between six to ten exhibits and if you received a first prize you were in good company. The Scottish National Rose, Sweet Pea and Carnation Society usually held their show the first Saturday in August. We were encouraged to go and exhibit by Jim, no point in being a spectator, if you have blooms take them along he would say.

Dad and I arrived on the Friday night and selected an area to stage our exhibits. I was also helping Jim at the same time. I was the apprentice who had to fill the vases with mare’s tail, water and wipe them clean. This ritual went on for several years until Dad discovered fuchsias. He said you have served your apprenticeship, its over to you now. I have been growing and showing ever since.

Each exhibitor had to reach a high standard of quality to compete at the National Show as competition was fierce when you had Archie Hume, Bill Dunn, Graham Moore, Andy Moore and of course Jimmy and Dad. There were other exhibitors but the names I have mentioned were all capable of producing good quality flowers.

I first exhibited at the BNCS show held at the RHS Halls in Westminster in 1982 and my mode of transport at that time was by coach. On arrival at the show I inspected my blooms which had been placed and packed in florist boxes for the journey down. The heat on the bus and the warm summer's night had reduced the size of the blooms to a third of what they were when packed. I had no option but to carry on and stage my potential exhibits. Placing the blooms in hot water before staging was a tip I'd learnt from big Jim. I put it into practice and it worked. While I was staging, the blooms were starting to increase in size.

Luck was on my side, the P.F's and Pinks were judged first so it gave my exhibits more time to achieve their full size of three and three quarters of an inch in diameter. As a result of all this hard work several firsts and a trophy were awarded to my exhibits. I was made very welcome, especially by the Robinsons who told me, 'if you come down to exhibit in London again, you must stay with us.'

In 1984 I married, bought a house and built a thirty foot lean to greenhouse just for border carnations. The weather in the spring and early summer of 1988 was exceptional; my carnations were flowering five weeks earlier than normal so my wife and I made the decision to travel to London to exhibit at the BNCS show, once again being held at Westminster. By this time I had made special crates, one for Jim and one for myself, each crate held 75 plastic tubes, which were sealed at the bottom to hold water. This kept the blooms in a fresh condition and undamaged when placed individually in each tube. We decided to travel down by train and the crate of blooms was placed in the guards van. The only drawback to that was at each station I had to jump up and make sure no one was throwing or placing anything on top of the blooms. All was well for the journey down and there were no mishaps. On arrival at the show the first person we met was Jack Woods who was writing for the Garden News. I'd known Jack for many years because he had reported on the Scottish National as well as Ayr Flower show. Jack was staging P.F's and I, of course, was staging borders.

During the show my wife and I were introduced to Ray Knight, Peter Russell, Ted Dungey and Mr & Mrs Galbally who all congratulated me on my fine exhibits. At the show my exhibits included the varieties *Margaret Stewart*, *Brian Tumbler*, *Royal Mail*, *Bookham Spice* and *Border Raider*. My vase of twelve which included eight *Margaret Stewart* and four *Brian Tumbler* was best in show. A single *Margaret Stewart* from that vase was best bloom in show. When the show closed for the day my wife and I had dinner with the Robinsons who insisted we go back to Enfield with them to take up their kind offer to stay with them.

Since then Jimmy and I have continued to show at various venues in Scotland and the north of England and the number of exhibitors has gradually declined. If we only had

dedicated growers and exhibitors in the numbers we were privileged to exhibit with in the past, the future would be promising.

So the journey continues with old and new friends and old and new varieties and if anyone would like to tread the same path just get in touch.

I have had a great deal of enjoyment over the past forty-four years with carnations, making friends, gaining a wife (that's another story involving carnations), improving my knowledge and trying to grow good quality flowers. Jimmy once said "Consistency is what you are trying to achieve. Having one good year is fine but to do it year after year is what you want to aspire to".